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Introduction to Philosophy

Theory of Value 1

Theory of Value

- Theory of Value is about things which are good or bad, right or wrong, concerning issues related to how one **ought** to behave and to what makes life valuable
- Broadly, there are two types of issues we are going to discuss:
 1. Are statements of value, like 'You ought to do this', because 'it is good to do this' and 'This person is a good person' and 'Pleasure is good', true/false, or are they not the kind of things which can be true/false?
 - If **no**, you are **subjectivist**.
 - If **yes**, there is a next question: How are such statements true/false?
 - If **because of reality**, then you are a **realist**
 - If **because someone determined it so**, then you are a **conventionalist**
 - > God: **Divine Command Theory**
 - > Society: **Ethical Relativism**
 - > Individual: **cf. Existentialism**

Theory of Value II

2. What makes valuable/good actions good?
 - We are going to discuss three views:
 - a. **Utilitarianism**: an action is good if and only if it maximizes the amount of pleasure/absence of pain or distress in society.
 - b. **Kantianism**: an action is good if you could turn it into a rational law
 - c. **Aristotelianism**: an action is good if it contributes to or flows from your well-functioning as a human being

Subjectivism

- Statements of value are neither true nor false
- Perhaps they are more like **expressions** of liking/disliking? (emotivism)
- Some **initial** arguments for subjectivism:
 - There is a lot of disagreement on value - therefore value is subjective
 - What is true or false describes what is the case; but a value statement does not describe what is the case, but what **ought** to be the case – therefore value is subjective
- **Only works if one assumes that only what is the case can be true/false – can be a fact**
- What is true or false describes natural properties; but according to the meaning of value statements, they do not describe natural properties – therefore value is subjective
- **Only works if one assumes that only natural (observable) properties can be described in true/false statements – only they appear in facts.**

Some 'Stronger' Arguments for Subjectivism

1. There is no reasoning in ethics, while there is in science, because there is nothing really to reason about
 - But there is a lot of reasoning in ethics, at least to check consistency
2. There are no observations in ethics, while there are in science, because there is nothing really there to observe
 - But we do make ethical observations, at least of particular cases
3. Disagreement in ethics cannot really be solved, for there is no path towards agreement one can agree about, while in science there are ways of ultimately finding out (and if not, it does not matter)
 - Sober's criticism: one can fail to see the truth in ethics because of, say, self-interest or self-deception > so there might be truth, even if there is no path to agreement
 - But in ethics, failure to see 'the truth' can only have consequences if other people disagree, while in science failure to see the truth leads one to expect impossibilities. **So after this argument the burden is upon those who want to maintain that there is some truth/falsehood to ethical statements – they have to show how that can be.**

The Strongest Argument for Subjectivism

- In order to explain us having beliefs about matters of science, we need to postulate facts for our beliefs to be about.
- Ultimately, what facts there are determines our beliefs (even if our beliefs are partly mistaken)
- Do we need to postulate facts to explain our beliefs about matters of value, so that our beliefs are about these facts?
- It does not seem so: our value beliefs can be explained by appeal to our 'natural responses', our upbringing, our experience, but we do not need ethical facts.

[[Sober's criticism: we need to distinguish between two types of explanation for our ethical beliefs:
 a. Particular ethical facts are not needed to explain particular ethical beliefs about them.
 b. General ethical principles do explain the content of our particular ethical beliefs, and that theory of value is true which explains that content best.]]

Evaluation of Subjectivism

- The arguments in favor of subjectivism do seem to point to a real difference between truth/falsity in the case of 'normal' knowledge and what holds in the case of ethical beliefs.
- Still, the suggestion of subjectivism is that we may believe anything we like about matters of ethics – that seems false, however:
 - Despite disagreement, there is also a lot of agreement about value, also between societies
 - Ethical beliefs are crucially shared, and play an important role in our deliberations on social action; thus they cannot be merely subjective – they must at least be inter-subjective

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Theory of Value 2

Recapitulation

- Subjectivism is the view that there are no facts of the matter at all to make value statements true or false
- Metaphysical arguments: the only real facts can only be described (**is**, not **ought**) or feature only natural properties
- But why could there not be other facts, or why could not real facts be described in two ways, as natural and as not-natural?
- Argument from deep disagreement: ethical disagreement cannot be settled in any way, even though one can argue in ethics > is most easily explained if there are no facts of the matter.
- Best argument: for most beliefs, the fact that we have them is explained best by reference to reality being so-and-so; for beliefs about value, however, that does not seem to be the case > the easiest explanation there seems that they are the result of our 'natural responses', our experience, our upbringing.
- All these arguments do point to a difference between normal beliefs and beliefs about value, but they are not enough to argue for subjectivism
- If subjectivism were correct, there should be deep disagreement about every belief about value > subjectivism cannot explain that there is also deep agreement about some values.
- Subjectivism cannot explain that it is crucial for beliefs about value that they are shared by at least some group.

Conventionalism

- The core idea of conventionalism is that there are facts about value, but that they are different from facts in science, because they are facts made facts by someone
- This can easily explain deep disagreement > not necessary to be subjectivist for that reason
- There are different versions of conventionalism, depending on who does the making: God, a culture/society, or an individual

Divine Command Theory

- Something is good because God/gods make it good
- Becomes all the more attractive, the more powerful one's concept of a god is: ancient Greek gods were not held to be very powerful, but monotheistic gods, having created the world, can become very powerful
- The more powerful a god is, the more difficult it is to distinguish between the divine command theory and realism > if a god has created the whole world, then everything is such that it is so because the god made it so.

Criticism of Divine Command Theory

- Criticism of Divine Command Theory assumes that there is a real difference between normal facts and ethical facts
- 1. There are many religions or many gods: are they all creating ethical facts?
- 2. If DCT were true, then the god(s) could have made any value statement true
 - They would have acted without a reason
 - They must have acted without a reason, because if they had had a reason, then the ethical fact would have been there, because of this reason, not because the god(s) would have made it a fact.
 - This argument works against any conventionalist theory.

Ethical Relativism

- Ethical relativism says that values are culture-dependent (not merely situation-dependent)
 - Not in the sense that cultures disagree about values
 - But in the stronger sense that values are there because they are adopted by a culture
- Problems with Ethical relativism:
 1. Same problem as with DCT: cultures could adopt any value – it is completely arbitrary
 2. It leads to conformism: it is impossible to criticize current values
 3. It does not justify the rule that one should not interfere with the values of another culture > why not just eradicate that culture?

Mitigated Ethical Relativism

- It seems possible to adopt a mixed account of value, according to which:
 - there are facts determining for some things what is good
 - For other things such facts are created by society/group

Realism

- How could there be ethical facts without them being the same type of facts as normal facts?
 - It is possible to talk about 'good' and 'bad' in a descriptive way:
 - 'This is a bad hammer'
 - 'My left eye is my good eye'
- Here 'good' and 'bad' is related to a **function** > something can be such that it can/cannot perform its function
- Artefacts have functions because human beings give them a function > created fact
 - Natural things have functions because in evolution these things remained there because of providing an advantage > real fact

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Theory of Value 3

Recapitulation I

- Subjectivism claims that there are no facts of the matter in ethics
- There is unresolvable disagreement in ethics, and that can best be explained by subjectivism
- To account for the beliefs of people on value matters, we do not have to appeal to facts about certain action: 'natural responses', upbringing, experience will do
- These arguments do show that value facts either do not exist, or are at least different from 'normal' facts
- Subjectivism cannot explain 'deep agreement'

Recapitulation II

- Conventionalism: there are ethical facts, but they are **made**
- By god(s): Divine Command Theory
- By culture/society: Ethical Relativism
- By individual
- Main problem of Conventionalism: it is arbitrary what kind of values the god(s)/society/the individual adopt (and if it is not arbitrary, then the facts are not made so)

Realism

- In case of an 'obviously good or bad thing' many have the intuition that it is really obvious that it is good or bad > 'Don't you see?!'
> as if there is a fact out there which everybody should see, and as if it is a mistake not to see > Realism
- How could there be ethical facts without them being the same type of facts as normal facts?
- It is possible to talk about 'good' and 'bad' in a descriptive way:
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 Here 'good' and 'bad' is related to a **function** > something can be such that it can/cannot perform its function
 - Artefacts have functions because human beings give them a function > created fact
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Realism II

- Perhaps there are also such facts in the case of ethics > two possibilities would be:
 1. A **society** can only function if there are certain norms > these norms are good, as a fact
 2. An **individual** of a species can only function if it engages in certain types of actions > these actions are good, as a fact
- > Utilitarianism seems to be sympathetic to such a view: being pleasurable can be seen as involving well-functioning

Possible Objections

- Do societies and individuals have functions?
 - Whether a society functions well with certain norms also depends on the circumstances, which might change > do the facts change as well?
 - What would be the function of a human being?
 - *Being alive* seems not enough for ethics
 - *Being rational* seems far too much
 - Should we sometimes not overcome our functions? > for example: eating meat may seem to belong to our well-functioning, but is that good?

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Theory of Value 4

Recapitulation

- Realism tries to combine:
 - Value beliefs are different from 'normal' beliefs (the subjectivist point - so as to also explain the possibility of deep disagreement)
 - there are real facts, not just facts created by someone
- by deriving value from real facts about human beings, either human beings individually or in groups (societies) > on the basis of a function and a criterion for functioning well
- Does this strategy work for all values? It may work for justice, inter-personal relations, but perhaps not for general abstract principles of value or for relations with non-humans.

Theories about what makes actions good

- We will discuss three views:
 1. Utilitarianism: good is what leads to the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people
 2. Kantianism: good is what can be turned into a rational law
 3. Aristotelianism: good is what flows from/contributes to human well-functioning

Utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism: an action is good because it brings about the greatest happiness/well-being/pleasure for the greatest number
 - Overriding
 - Really universal and equal
 - Reason-involving in finding out what does bring this about

Utilitarianism and Calculating the Greatest Good

- One standard objection against Utilitarianism: How to compare different goods/pleasures? How can we calculate the greatest good?
- John Stuart Mill (1806-73): pleasures are different, but we can still compare them, at least those of us who know the pleasures involved
 - > They prefer the 'higher' kinds of pleasure (of the intellect) > they count for 'more'

Utilitarianism and Fairness

- Utilitarianism does justice to the idea that in many cases we value an action because of its consequences
 - > everybody counts equally > seems fair
- If the suffering of one person leads to a greater overall well-being, utilitarianism prescribes that action
 - > utilitarianism thus does not seem fair

Rule Utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism tries to circumvent the problem of fairness by introducing rules:
 - > one should introduce rules, including ones for fairness, because they lead to a greater well-being for the greatest number of people
 - > the idea: infringement of the rule may on this occasion lead to more well-being, but not in the long run
- Does this solve all the problems? **No, rules which discriminate against minorities in support of the happiness of the majority are still possible > one needs a stronger principle to avoid that: John Rawls proposed the 'veil of ignorance': rules should be formulated in isolation from knowledge who is going to profit from them and who is at a disadvantage > doing as if you don't know where in society you will end up.**

Utilitarianism and the Evaluation of Persons

- One consequence of Utilitarianism is that it is irrelevant who is doing the action and certainly irrelevant who the ones involved in the action are
 - If, of two people, you can only save one, and one is your child, then you do not have any reason to save your child and not the other.
 - Peter Singer: if you have to choose between a human being and an animal, you do not have a reason to choose either.



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